

Let's Talk About *Calvinism*

by Jeremy James



The word *Calvinism* is confusing. Why not call it *Christianity*?

Well, that's the problem. The two are not the same.

At the outset I should acknowledge that Calvinist churches, like all denominational churches, contain a mix of believers and unbelievers. Many true Christians are professing Calvinists. Countless numbers of Calvinists have made an immense contribution to the spread of the Gospel and have been fearless defenders of the faith. The history of western civilization from the 16th century onward would have been incomparably worse, and the world more thoroughly Romanised than it already is, without the selfless contribution made by courageous Calvinists throughout Europe and beyond.

Our aim in this paper is to consider whether the Calvinist church, despite its achievements, may nonetheless blind many of its members to the fact that they are not truly saved, but are 'professing Christians' only.

This, we believe, is a fair question to ask of any Christian denomination, not just Calvinism. Every sincere believer should ask whether or not his church is preaching the Gospel as it should. Have errors or misunderstandings crept in? Are basic truths still being taught in a Biblically correct manner? All through Paul's Epistles we find exhortations of this kind. So, in 'talking about Calvinism', we are addressing issues that Calvinists themselves should be more than willing to consider.

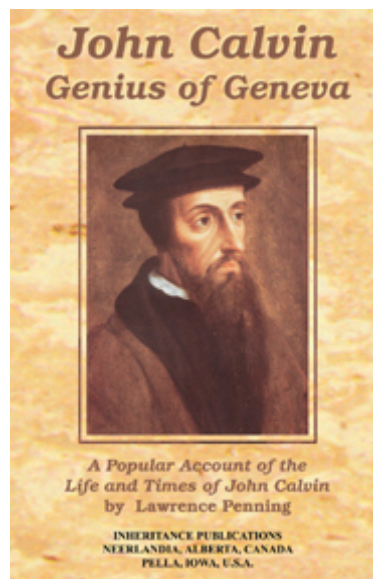
So, our basic question is this – Does Calvinism preach the Gospel correctly?

The Gospel of Calvinism

One could spend a lifetime reviewing and analyzing the doctrines of Calvinism, so extensive are they, with their multiple nuances, technical terms, and finely chiselled distinctions. This may seem like a strength to some, but it is really part of the problem. Calvinism is much closer to being a religious philosophy, with its complex proofs and logical arguments, than a plain statement of Biblical truth.

Calvin wanted to build an intellectual edifice that would repel an attack from any quarter. He was not unlike Thomas Aquinas, who tried to construct an intellectually perfect system of theology to underpin Roman Catholicism and who, for that purpose, made extensive use of the writings of Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher. In like manner, Calvin made copious use of the religious ideas developed by Augustine of Hippo, who had in turn had been greatly influenced by Plato – another colossus of ancient Greek philosophy.

Calvin was so impressed by Augustine that he quoted him directly more than 250 times in his monumental tome, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. When one considers that all of the principal doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church may be found in embryo in Augustine's writings, and that Augustine himself has been officially designated a 'Doctor' (or pillar) of the Roman Catholic Church, his profound attachment to Augustine is highly problematic. How can a pillar of Romanism be used to uphold the truths of Christianity?



The Word of God warns of the dangers we face when we turn His truth into an intellectual system. Of course, we must study it well and grow in our understanding of all that He has revealed for our benefit, but we cannot enter into vain disputations or allow ourselves to be fixated on ideas spawned by our own imagination. Rather, we must stick very closely to what the Word of God actually says, weigh it carefully by reference to statements made elsewhere in Scripture, and then believe it.

In the complex world of Calvinism, it is very easy to become distracted "**from the simplicity that is in Christ**" (2 Corinthians 11:3), and yet without this simplicity we cannot understand the Gospel (which can be stated as follows):

Unregenerate man is lost, dead in trespasses and sins, and under condemnation before a just and holy God. There is nothing he can do to save himself. However, God in His infinite mercy sent Christ Jesus, His only begotten Son, to suffer and die in our place and secure eternal life on our behalf. To receive the gift of salvation, we must repent of our sins and, by the grace of God, believe that Christ suffered, died and rose again in order to reconcile us with God.

How wonderfully simple! Even a child could understand it.

Now let's look at the Gospel as it is taught in Calvinism [The differences between the two versions are highlighted]:

Unregenerate man is lost, dead in trespasses and sins, and under condemnation before a just and holy God. There is nothing he can do to save himself. However, God in His infinite mercy sent Christ Jesus, His only begotten Son, to suffer and die in our place and secure eternal life on our behalf. **In His sovereign will God decided in advance which souls would be saved and which would remain lost.** To receive the gift of salvation, **these elect souls will inevitably** repent of their sins and, by the grace of God, believe that Christ suffered, died and rose again in order to reconcile us with God.

Something entirely new and horrifying has been introduced into the Calvinist version, something that cannot be found anywhere in God's Word. This unnatural interpolation destroys the simplicity of the Gospel. What was intended as 'good news' for **all** who heard it has instead become 'good news' only for those who have already been predestined by God to believe it.

The Gospel is intended by God for *Everyone*

The Bible tells us that the Gospel message is for everyone. It sets down no restrictions, conditions or qualifications. The gift of salvation is freely offered to anyone who hears it, and whosoever hears it may accept it. Scripture makes this abundantly clear. For example, among the sorrowing masses of humanity, has there ever lived even one individual to whom the 'whosoever' in each of the following verses did not apply? –

"Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 10:32)

"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (Matthew 16:25)

"Also I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God" (Luke 12:8)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?" (John 11:26)

"And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Acts 2:21)

"Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God." (1 John 4:15)

Each and every one of us came into this world as "whosoever." This offer, the free gift of salvation, is addressed to everyone, without distinction. Furthermore, if it is genuine – and it has to be genuine if it comes from the LORD – then it must be possible for the individual to accept it. A just and loving God would never make an offer that He knew could not be accepted.

Many Calvinists try to avoid this interpretation. In their view, in choosing to believe the Gospel, the individual is only manifesting the outcome of a decision that God had already made on his behalf before the foundation of the world. They are asserting, in effect, that some of those who hear the Gospel have no choice but to believe it, while the rest, upon hearing it, have no choice but to reject it. And this, of course, is a logical absurdity.

The Calvinised or Restricted Gospel

Calvinists do not seem to appreciate the extent to which their *Calvinised* or *Restricted Gospel* demeans both the Word of God and the character of God.

Let's look first at the former. All through the Bible we find the LORD God of Israel calling on fallen man to repent of his sins and return to Him. He may punish and chastize him, and send prophets and preachers to instruct him, but the actual decision is left to man. God has asked us to choose Him freely.

We know that man was made originally with free will since God asked him not to eat the fruit of a certain tree in the Garden. Man had a choice – to obey or disobey. Adam acted presumptuously and went against the will of God. The subsequent program of Redemption that the LORD then instituted was predicated on the fact that man, in his fallen state, could still freely choose to return to God, provided a means of reconciliation was available.

We could cite hundreds of passages from Scripture to show that fallen man has the ability to make that choice. However, we will confine our study to just one book, that of Isaiah. This will allow us to see how, through the writings of just one Biblical author, the principle of free will can be clearly established. It will also enable us to avoid the objection that, while different authors were using the same language, they might not necessarily have been referring to the same thing.

We will take the verses in the order they are given by Isaiah:

"If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it." (Isaiah 1:19-20)

This straightforward offer is conditional on the willingness and obedience of men. The LORD is not going to impose His will on them. They must make this choice themselves.

"To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear." (Isaiah 28:12)

The LORD offered blessing, but men refused to be obedient. They did not want to hear and chose to disobey Him.

"For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not." (Isaiah 30:15)

Again the LORD offered great blessing to Israel, provided they turned from their evil ways and repented, but they chose not to.

"Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers? did not the LORD, he against whom we have sinned? for they would not walk in his ways, neither were they obedient unto his law." (Isaiah 42:24)

His will was clear, but they refused to walk in His ways and obey His laws.

"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: Calling a ravenous bird [Nebuchadnezzar] from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it." (Isaiah 46:9-11)

The LORD is telling them that, since they refused to obey His will, He would execute judgment upon them (via Nebuchadnezzar). His counsel or judgment would stand. Where judgment is concerned, God's will is final, but where His blessings are conditional on obedience, then men must choose whether to obey or disobey His holy will.

"I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, after their own thoughts" (Isaiah 65:2)

Their disobedience was not curbed in any way by God's will. God's will is righteous or "good," but they insisted on walking in a way that was not good. They rejected His will and did so "after their own thoughts." Man therefore has the ability to think and act contrary to God's will.

"Therefore will I number you to the sword, and ye shall all bow down to the slaughter: because when I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear; but did evil before mine eyes, and did choose that wherein I delighted not." (Isaiah 65:12)

This is a dramatic declaration of man's rejection of God's will. When He called, they refused to answer. When He spoke, they refused to listen. He made His will plain, but they chose to do evil.

"Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations. I also will choose their delusions, and will bring their fears upon them; because when I called, none did answer; when I spake, they did not hear: but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not." (Isaiah 66:3-4)

This passage is very similar to the previous one (65:12). Man refused to obey God's holy will even though he clearly had the ability to do so.

It is hardly necessary to dwell further on this point. Isaiah is telling us in stark and unequivocal terms that man **can** resist God's will.

Calvinism mischaracterizes God's love

We could give a corresponding set of verses from Jeremiah, all proclaiming the ability of man, in his fallen, rebellious state, to both resist and reject God's holy will. The same distressing reality runs right through the Bible, so how is it possible for anyone – in a spirit of reasonableness – to assert otherwise?

To sin is to act contrary to God's will. Since man has the ability to sin he must also have the ability to reject His will. However, by claiming that God actively wills all things and that nothing whatever can occur except through the direct exercise of His will, Calvin places ultimate responsibility for sin on God Himself. This is both ridiculous and blasphemous, a conclusion so absurd that it is impossible to understand how a repentant, Spirit-filled child of God could believe it.

Calvinism seriously mischaracterizes God's love by confusing His foreknowledge of the elect with His alleged pre-selection of the elect. God knew before the foundation of the world which souls would repent and accept the free gift of salvation and which would not, but He did not make the decision for them.



Anabaptists were Christians who believed that a regenerated person should be baptised as soon as possible after they were born again, just as the Bible says (*Anabaptist* means "baptised again").

These unfortunate people were ruthlessly persecuted across Europe by Lutherans, Calvinists, and the apostate church of Rome.

Calvinism mischaracterizes God's sovereignty

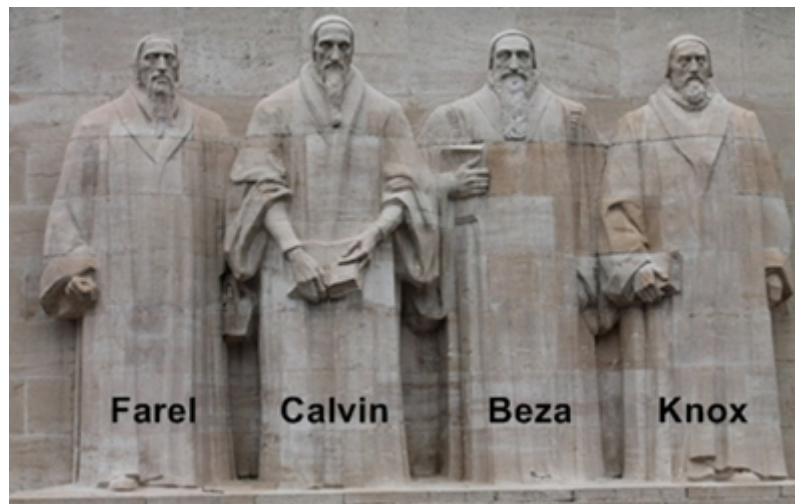
This brings us to our second major difficulty with Calvinism. If the first mischaracterizes His love, the second mischaracterizes His sovereignty.

Calvin, like Augustine before him, taught that the will of God could never be successfully challenged by a created being. He reasoned that, if this were possible, then God's sovereignty was compromised in some manner. Calvin could see only one way around this difficulty. He reasoned that God must have preordained before the creation of the world the smallest detail of everything that would happen thereafter.

While he does not appear to have described this model of creation in mechanical terms, he was clearly influenced by the Greek concept of 'God' as the Unmoved Mover, the ultimate and absolute cause of everything. Calvin's 'God' is the god of Greek philosophy, not the LORD God of the Bible. The 'godhead' of the Greeks was incapable of entering into a covenant relationship with man. The very idea was completely alien to Greek thought. In stark contrast to this, the LORD God of Israel was not only capable of entering into a covenant relationship with man, but actually went ahead and did so.

The distant, abstract, impersonal god of Greek philosophy exercised his will by fiat. It was impossible for mortal man to oppose it, or to resist it in any way. Since this was Calvin's concept of 'God', he had to ascribe to Him a similar *modus operandi*. Thus men had no choice but to comply with His inexorable will. Those He elected to salvation were saved, while the rest, the non-elect, were damned.

In Calvin's view of sovereignty, God was actually constrained by His inability to create a universe in which all men had free will without at the same time compromising His absolute executive authority. Thus without realizing it Calvin himself impugned the absolute sovereignty of God. Instead of acknowledging that His awesome greatness surpasses human understanding, Calvin reduced the LORD God of the Bible to the rank of Clockmaker, a Being who could ensure the execution of his sovereign will only by designing from the outset a mechanical universe that would operate exactly as he intended.



Men commit the sin of pride when they presume to know how God does anything that He does. They refuse to accept that **"His ways are past finding out"** (Romans 11:33). The LORD God of the Bible is not a 'Swiss Clock' God!

Calvin made a great mistake when he allowed Greek philosophy to shape his understanding of God. Perhaps he failed to see the extent to which Augustine's theology was imbued with the mysticism of Plato, on the one hand, and Greek determinism on the other. He simply couldn't see that God's sovereignty was so great that He could give free will to all men and STILL accomplish His holy will to the smallest detail.

Free Will and Pagan Philosophers

The age-old argument between determinism and free-will, which has greatly exercised the minds of pagan philosophers for the past three thousand years, is a non-argument in Biblical Christianity. For the LORD God of Israel, causality is not something that takes place in time, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. We have already quoted an important verse in relation to this:

"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:9).

He sees all of creation in its totality – timelessly, completely, perfectly. He sees all that has not yet happened as though it had already happened: **"Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world."** (Acts 15:18)

He knew before He created the world that – in the fullness of time – it would fully and perfectly satisfy His awesome holiness, the inflexible demands of His daunting righteousness. He achieved this through Christ, the Alpha and Omega, His wonderful Son, who joined the Beginning and the End in eternal perfection. As Christ himself said: **"I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last."** (Revelation 22:13)

Was anything lost in the LORD's great plan? No, nothing whatever was lost. And was free will available throughout? Yes, it most certainly was. Such is the astounding achievement of Christ!

By trying to explain Christianity through the dark lens of Greek philosophy, Calvin made a terrible error, just like Augustine before him. It cannot be done.

Christians today who profess to be Calvinists need to reflect carefully on these issues since they have a direct bearing on both their salvation and their ongoing sanctification. The strange fruit of Calvin's terrible error is plainly visible in the many unbiblical doctrines of modern Calvinism. These include infant baptism, regeneration through baptism, the recognition of Roman Catholic baptism, the alliance of church and state, a failure to distinguish between regeneration and conversion, and the doctrine that the new birth precedes faith. On top of this, Calvinism is mired in amillennialism, replacement theology (which teaches that the church has replaced Israel), and an allegorical approach to Bible prophecy.



While these erroneous beliefs may not be held by all Calvinists – since there are a surprising number of 'positions' within Calvinism – they are extremely common and a cause of genuine concern.

Predestination

Most of the difficulties within Calvinism can be traced back to its unwavering adherence to the Augustinian doctrine of predestination. As we have seen, they teach that God decided which souls would be saved and which would be damned. Since this false doctrine came under sustained attack from the Arminians in the early 17th century, the Calvinists decided to spell out exactly what they meant in strict theological terms. This was formalised at the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619 in the form of five principles which have been recognized ever since as the five pillars of Calvinism [and are often referred to by the acronym 'tulip']:

1. Total Depravity

The unregenerate (unsaved) man is dead in his sins, blind and deaf to the message of the gospel. This is why Total Depravity has also been called "Total Inability." The man without a knowledge of God will never come to this knowledge unless God enables him.

2. Unconditional Election

Before the foundation of the world, God chose those whom he was pleased to bring to a knowledge of himself. This decision was based solely upon the counsel of his own will, without any reference whatever to the will or compliance of the individual

3. Limited Atonement

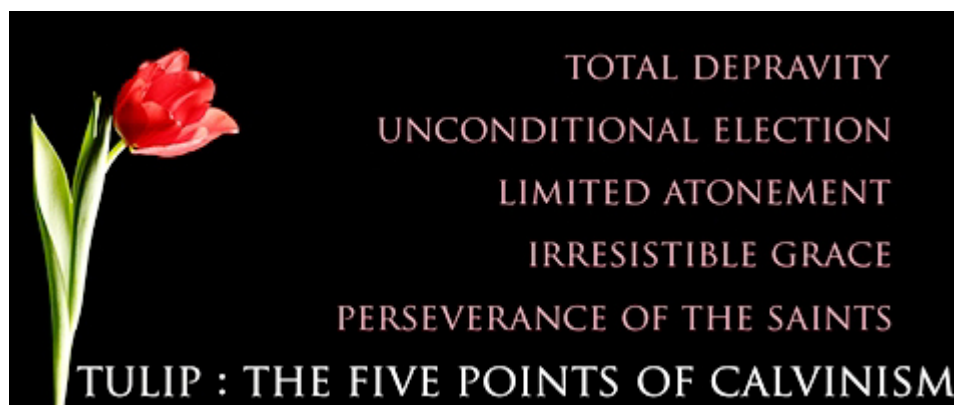
Christ died for the elect only. He did not die for anyone else since no-one else was predestined to benefit from his death.

4. Irresistible Grace

Every member of the elect will respond to the call of the Holy Spirit, regardless of their spiritual condition.

5. Perseverance of the Saints

Once the individual has been regenerated, he will continue thereafter into glory.



These five principles may sound very "theological" but the only one of substance is the first. Each of the others can be derived naturally from the Calvinist understanding of the first. Thus, the principle of *total depravity* requires unconditional election since there is no other way to be saved; the principle of *total depravity* implies limited atonement since Christ could not possibly die for anyone outside the predetermined elect; the principle of *total depravity* implies that grace must be irresistible since none of the elect, whose selection was predestined, could possibly resist; and the principle of *total depravity* implies that no predestined member of the elect, having been regenerated, can undo his election.

The Synod of Dort simply defined predestination in five different ways. In a sense Calvinism offers salvation by numbers. By assenting to the first principle one assents to all five. All distinctions thereafter among Calvinists – whether *moderate*, *extreme* or *hyper* – are determined solely by the strength and consistency of their convictions.

Calvinists profess to believe in a God who can do anything He pleases, and yet the same God is unable to create a universe where all souls – and not just some – are predestined to salvation. Please think carefully about this because it conflicts with the clear Biblical teaching on the love and sovereignty of God:

"The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Calvinism teaches that God allowed an unspecified number of souls to come into existence who could not possibly know Him, who were deliberately denied any hope of salvation, and who would thereafter suffer great torment in eternity through no act or choice of their own. This is a gross perversion of God's everlasting mercy.

The Never-Damned Club

It is hardly surprising that Calvinism has a cult-like grip on many of its members. Once a person perceives himself as one of the 'elect', chosen by God from the foundation of the world, he is in a trap. In his theology he differs only from the unsaved in that he was chosen for salvation, but in practice – in his mind – he sees himself as someone who had always been in an entirely separate class. He was never a member at any time of the 'other' class, that group of degenerates who were predestined from the outset for perdition.

Where have we met this attitude before? - **"God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men..." (Luke 18:11)**

This perception, which lies at the very heart of Calvinism, is plainly wrong. It creates an apartheid system that divides the world into two classes, the *really-damned* and the *never-damned*. As individuals, the *never-damned* were always in a class apart, a group that had **always** been completely separate from the *really-damned*, only they didn't know it. There was always something about them that made them different, a special God-given property that would not become evident for a number of years. Indeed, with infant baptism, even that small delay was eliminated since a person's prior membership of the *never-damned* club could be confirmed within hours or days of his birth.

It is hardly a coincidence that the two most entrenched systems of white-controlled slavery in modern times were in the apartheid state of South Africa and the American deep south, where in each case Calvinism was the main religious persuasion. Even Calvin's 'perfect' state, the Swiss city of Geneva, was an apartheid state where dissenters of all kinds, however moderate, were imprisoned or expelled. The record shows that Calvin himself did not object to – and on occasion called for – the execution of those he deemed apostate. He also approved of the persecution of the Anabaptists, to the point of death if necessary – even though these were harmless Christian folk whose only 'crime' was the practice of adult baptism.

Calvinism teaches that God is the author of sin

The false principle of predestination makes God the author of sin. As the Supreme Executive responsible for all phenomena, the cause preceding all causes, there was no act of man that He could not have amended or determined to accord perfectly with His incorrigible will. Why did He not do so? According to Calvinism (which normally has an answer for everything), this is a mystery, just like His decision to make a multitude of souls whose final destiny – eternal damnation – was decided by Him before the foundation of the world.

The Word of God tells us that the false principle of predestination began in the Garden of Eden. Eve blamed the serpent (whom God created), while Adam blamed the woman whom God had given him: **"And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat."** (Genesis 3:12)

A Question that Needs an Answer

In light of the perplexing problems caused by the principle of predestination, one must ask why so many Christians over the past four hundred years – truly regenerated, born-again Christians – were practising Calvinists? If the theology of Calvinism does more to hide than reveal the Gospel – as we claim in this paper – then one would never have expected such a harvest of souls.

What is the explanation for this?

The answer, I believe, is two-fold. Firstly, Calvinists at one time had a very clear understanding of the power of Satan. They had no doubt that he was a dangerous Adversary who, in concert with his demonic hoard, could wreak havoc in the life of the believer. They knew his ways were incredibly subtle and that, without thorough immersion in God's Holy Word, the believer was likely to be led astray. In short, they drew their strength directly from the Word of God, not from their Calvinised gospel.

The second reason is closely related to this – many Calvinists simply paid lip-service to the principle of predestination. Those who were truly regenerated, and were personally acquainted with the love of Christ, had a heart for the lost. Spurgeon was a great example of this. A huge number of his sermons were grounded in the belief that anyone who heard the Gospel could be saved. He did not believe in predestined deafness.



Conclusion

As Romans chapter 5 confirms, salvation is a gift. Those who hear the Gospel are offered this gift. We choose either to accept it or reject it. The gift is freely offered, without conditions. To receive it we have only to believe in Christ, the Son of God, with all our heart and what he did for us through his suffering, death and resurrection.

Calvinism rejects Romans 5.

Calvinism also mischaracterizes the LORD God of the Bible. It portrays Him as a being whose sovereignty is such that He can accomplish His will only by denying free will to the very being whom He made in His own image and likeness. This is the god of Plato and the Greek philosophers, not the LORD God of Israel. It presents Him as a deity whose love is arbitrary, who deliberately creates souls for the purpose of punishing them in eternity for a crime they were predestined by Him to commit.

This is insane. There is no other way to put it. Both the sovereignty and love of God are gravely distorted. What is more, the Biblical doctrine of sin is completely undermined. The principle of predestination, with its bizarre distinction between the *never-damned* and the *really-damned*, reduces sin to an incidental element in a play whose script was determined in every detail from the outset.

The historian Will Durant captured the horror of Calvin's message when he said it "...darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God..." The Adversary dealt a powerful blow to Christianity when he got men to confuse the LORD God of Israel with the strange god of Geneva.

Calvinism in its modern form – which has largely rejected the demonic reality of Satan and the sufficiency and inerrancy of God's Word – is ripe for absorption into the coming One World Religion. It has no clear understanding of what it means to be born again. With its practice of infant baptism – not to mention its recognition of the efficacy of Roman Catholic baptism – it could easily be taken over by Catholic 'converts'.

In Calvinism the loving God of the Bible is replaced by a 'God' whose love is capricious and irrational and whose sovereignty is reduced to that of a Greek deity who can accomplish his will only by compelling his creation to behave exactly the way he wants.

For centuries Calvinists were convinced that their strength came from their five pillars, but they were mistaken. It came rather from their deep familiarity with and respect for God's Word, plus their keen sense of the dangers posed by the Adversary. Today these vital sources of spiritual nourishment and protection have been lost and, in consequence, their religious tradition is breaking apart.

I would urge Calvinists of any persuasion to abandon the cold formalism of the five pillars. Each one of us is a sinner saved by grace. We each came into the world in exactly the same spiritual condition as every soul who ever walked the earth. Without exception, we are all members of the great "whosoever" that the Bible addresses, not an elite, not a pre-ordained elect, but a body of once-lost souls blessed beyond measure. When we heard His voice we responded and were taken into His flock. And now it behoves each and every one of us to share the good news of the Gospel in all its simplicity, just as Christ gave it, without the hard shell of human philosophy.

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